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The Guardian Wednesday 26 August 2026

Journal

Opinion and ideas

Peace, rights, solidarity: that's what the world's citizens want

Gordon Brown

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Britain's new prime minister, Andy Burnham, is already having to make one of his gravest decisions. He has to issue the instructions that he alone gives to the military, setting out the UK response in a doomsday scenario of a nuclear weapons attack on us. He will, as I did two decades ago, sign a piece of paper telling commanders whether or not to retaliate and, if so, whether through targeting civilian conurbations or military sites. These instructions are written down in the aptly named "letter of last resort".

Now, more than at any time since the 1960s Cuban missile crisis, the European public fears a third world war. With the nuclear Doomsday Clock developed by atomic scientists moving ever closer to midnight, and Japan, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Poland and Germany contemplating either acquiring nuclear weapons or siting them on their soil, our world is descending from a rules-based order to a power-based one, where brute force dominates.

Russian president Vladimir Putin has abandoned any pretence of supporting international law – "no one is ready to play by rules set by one person somewhere far away," he has said – while China's president, Xi Jinping, has warned that reunification with Taiwan "cannot be stopped by any force or anyone". And with Donald Trump's recent threat of genocide against the Iranian people – "a whole civilisation will die tonight, never to be brought back again" – and his further threat to even bomb an ally, Oman, the US president has demonstrated yet again his contempt for every single pillar of the previous US-led order: human rights, multilateral cooperation, humanitarian aid and the rule of law itself.

But what should give us a measure of hope, as revealed in a survey covering more than 36,000 people in 34 countries, conducted for my new book, is that people's rising fears of conflict are now matched by a clear demand that the world come together to counter this collapse into chaos. We asked a most demanding question: whether people would support "international cooperation", even if it meant some compromise of their "country's national interest". The 55% who said yes, with only 20% saying no, were clearly signalling their rejection of the "America first", "Russia first", "China first", "my country first" dogmas that view life as no more than an endless struggle between an "us" and a "them". Clear majorities in every continent oppose those populist nationalist leaders, who see geopolitics as a zero-sum

ILLUSTRATION: ALEX MELLON/ GETTY IMAGES

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On Thursday 10 September, join Hugh Muir and Gordon Brown as they discuss Brown's new book, The Future Starts With Us. Book tickets at theguardian.com

Peace, rights, solidarity: that's what the world's citizens want

Gordon Brown

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game in which their country can only do well if other countries do badly.

Indeed, more than 70% of the global public want their governments to uphold human rights and the rule of law, take action on the climate crisis, AI and cyber security and fund humanitarian aid. Follow-up research shows that an even larger group – 80% – believes there should be a global system to ensure the existence of policies that not only engender peace and stability, but also require action against poverty, disease, hunger and illiteracy.

Most important of all, we now know how support for cooperation can be increased. In every country, it is the very people who are active in their own communities, and who have connections that cross ethnic and religious divides, who are 50% more likely to support international cooperation, even when it involves some sacrifice of national interest. The message is clear: to rebuild support for cooperation across borders, we should start by rebuilding communities at home.

But even if there is an emerging consensus on what to do, the question is: who can bring people together now that we are moving from a unipolar world, where the US sets the agenda and could enforce its will, to a more multipolar world, with many competing centres of power?

We find that the big-three nuclear-weapon powers – the US, China and Russia – are more unloved than ever. Instead, the global public looks to other countries – principally Canada, Australia, Italy, Japan, the UK and France, Germany, Brazil and South Korea, and in that order – as potential unifying forces. These also turn out to be the countries whose own people are the most eager to cooperate and take on a leadership role, advocated by Canadian prime minister Mark Carney and Finnish president Alexander Stubb.

But can a new concert of countries ever overrule the US and China on the big issues such as nuclear disarmament or AI and cyber regulation? Unlikely, given those two countries' coercive power through military threats, tariffs, trade bans and sanctions, and the US's singular power to weaponise the dollar. Still, now is the time to discuss how we move from a world where technology dominates the state, as in the US, or the state dominates technology, as in China.

Already, the rest of us are creating a new system for arbitrating trade disputes and for outlawing crimes against humanity. The EU and Asian-led CPTPP may yet form the biggest trade alliance the world has ever seen. How many battalions do the lesser powers have, one might ask, adapting the question Stalin is said to have asked of a previous pope? But, up against the power to compel, we can counterpose the legitimacy accorded by most fair-minded people to international human rights and humanitarian law.

Countries other than Russia, China and the US and their satellites control 75% of the votes at the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and have huge majorities at the World Trade Organization and the World Health Organization, as well as 12 of the 15 votes – and two of the five vetoes – on the UN security council. So there is no reason why we cannot make progress on agreeing principles of cooperation to deliver on the climate crisis, humanitarian aid, peacemaking and the global war against poverty. When a new UN secretary-general is appointed, to begin work in the new year, I would urge like-minded countries to agree with her or him a programme of action for 2027.

The US public also prefers cross-border cooperation to going it alone. They want the US to lead by persuasion, not by coercion. And they can be convinced that the US that used to act multilaterally in a unipolar world should stop acting unilaterally in what is becoming a multipolar world.

But, for the time being, progress will depend upon a coordinated push by the UK and cooperation-minded powers. The message from our survey of global opinion is that our citizens do look out in hope of a better world – and a troubled world looks to us. That's an issue for Britain's new PM – and for everyone.

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'Comment is free... but facts are sacred' CP Scott

Geopolitics

Trump's economic bullying gives other countries good reasons to seek the exit

Three moves in the last week have exposed the limits of Donald Trump's economic bullying. The US slapped 50% tariffs on another $20bn of Canadian goods – then threatened the same rate on the cars, trucks, parts and steel that America Inc depends on. On Monday, the Treasury secretary, Scott Bessent, menaced Iran's trading partners with exclusion from the US financial network, hoping that coercion can deliver what months of war have not. And as the costs of war, tariffs and pro-billionaire tax cuts helped send US bond yields higher, the Treasury stepped in to tame long-term rates. These are not contradictory policies but a gamble: that US economic power can be repeatedly weaponised without reducing others' willingness to depend on it.

The Trump administration's "D-day" sanctions are potentially the most consequential because they expose the scaffolding of American financial power. While markets shrugged off the immediate threat, that calculation might change were the US to target a major Chinese refinery or bank. Such an escalation could spark a trade war with Beijing. The US has leverage. But China has pressure points – especially farmers in Republican states – that make using it costly. In the long run, there is a price to pay. Nations hold one another's currencies partly because they trust the political relationship. Mr Trump is testing what happens when they don't.

The moves to control the bond market are the most revealing. There is nothing new about Washington managing yields: the Federal Reserve has long been able to buy treasuries. What is new is Mr Bessent doing it so openly to deal with the fallout from failed policies. Mr Trump owns this: his tariffs raise input costs; his Iran war pushed up energy costs; his nonchalance about rising American grocery prices reassures no one. When that mixture helps produce higher inflation expectations and rising long-end bond yields, Mr Trump's team steps in to prevent interest rates ticking up.

The US president is willing to use state power to lower borrowing costs while hiking others through tariffs, war and cuts to social programmes. Mr Bessent wants to stop rising long yields feeding into investment and Washington's debt-interest bill. That his former mentor at George Soros's hedge fund criticises him and wants bond markets to force spending cuts is not to be applauded. The better question for Mr Bessent is: why shield markets from the consequences of Mr Trump's acts, but not households?

The trade war with Canada is economically stupid and legally dubious. In 2025, the Trump tariffs amounted to an average tax increase of $1,000 per US household. More than a quarter of Canadian exports to the US are now subject to significant tariffs or threatened with tougher ones. Ottawa's retaliation will start in September. North American production has been organised around such trade flows and tariffs will make US manufacturing more expensive, not less.

Why Canada? Washington has largely given up trying to change China's economic model. Canada is seen as a soft target. The Guardian columnist Robert Reich is surely right: Mr Trump picks on a friendly neighbour because that is what bullies do. This cannot go on. American economic power depends on other countries wanting to remain in a system the US dominates. Mr Trump thinks their dependence is his weapon. The more often he uses it against them, the harder they should look for the exit.

France

A badly divided left will make Marine Le Pen's path to the Élysée much easier

In the summer of 2024, as polls suggested that Marine Le Pen's far-right Rassemblement National party would win a snap legislative election rashly called by Emmanuel Macron, the perennially fragmented French left united to spectacular effect. The New Popular Front, whose name evoked Léon Blum's anti-fascist alliance in the 1930s, came first in a poll that delivered a hung parliament.

Eight months before a presidential contest in which Ms Le Pen is the clear frontrunner, the prospect of a repeat performance appears close to zero. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the leader of the hard-left France Unbowed, and Olivier Faure, the leader of the Socialist party (PS), have both ruled out the idea of backing a single candidate. Efforts by the Greens to broker talks between progressive parties have fallen on deaf ears.

The obvious danger, as the most important election in the history of the Fifth Republic looms, is that chronic division will ease Ms Le Pen's path to the Élysée. The 75-year-old Mr Mélenchon is a deeply polarising figure who has failed three times to reach the second round of a presidential race. But in a fractured field, the loyalty of his base among the young, the urban precariat and ethnic minority voters gives him a credible chance of making the runoff this time. At which point, polls predict, France's traditional "Republican front" against the far right would disintegrate, handing Ms Le Pen a crushing victory.

Within the PS, the picture is one of confusion and debilitating internal rivalries. Raphael Glucksmann, the leader of Public Square, a small sister movement, declared his candidacy on Sunday and is favourite to win a joint primary. But senior figures such as the former president François Hollande are rumoured to be waiting to make their own move later on. The Greens are divided over whether to offer support to Mr Mélenchon's uncompromising leftism and reward his new emphasis on the environment, or back Mr Glucksmann's more centrist strategy.

All of which makes Mr Glucksmann's stated ambition to "rebuild the left" seem somewhat optimistic. A Parisian intellectual married to a famous television newsreader (who has taken leave for the duration of the campaign), he is polling at 10% and is unburdened by the aura of failure that has dogged the Socialist party in recent years. But if he becomes its presidential candidate, he will face the same challenge as his immediate predecessors: how to reconnect with alienated blue-collar towns that now vote for Ms Le Pen, while simultaneously courting Mr Mélenchon's urban radicals and reassuring middle-class voters who deserted for Mr Macron.

In 2022, the former Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo comprehensively flunked that test, receiving 1.75% of votes cast. A historic humiliation was partly the result of progressive voters calculating that Mr Mélenchon was the left candidate with the best chance of coming second, thus excluding Ms Le Pen from the runoff. But as the 2027 campaign begins in earnest, she enjoys a 20-point lead in the polls, and another place in the second round is all but assured.

The question, therefore, is who can rally enough support from across the political spectrum to stop her becoming president. A united left would have had a far better chance of coming up with a convincing answer. But that is not the left France currently has.

Mohamed Al Fayed outside the Ritz hotel in Paris, June 2016
PHOTOGRAPH: KAMIL ZIHNIOGLU/AP

Three years to act on Al Fayed. But how long for his enablers?

Marina Hyde

How reassuring to learn that police investigating claims of sexual assault against Mohamed Al Fayed have handed a file to the Crown Prosecution Service, a mere three years after the former Harrods owner's death at the age of 94, and just decades after the first survivors made reports of abuse. The CPS has said it won't provide a timescale for any decision, to which we might remark: no shit. With this case, the one thing you could never accuse any of the authorities of is being bound by anything approaching a timescale.

The story does, however, certainly have scale. So far, more than 400 allegations including rape, sexual assault, sexual exploitation and human trafficking have been made against Al Fayed by at least 156 women – abuse he got away with, having died without any charges ever being brought against him. The claims span the years 1977 to 2014. At least 21 women came forward while he was alive, and there have been extraordinary rundowns in news articles and documentaries about all the alleged enablers of his wicked behaviour, from lawyers to mouthpieces to security henchmen to the doctors who carried out "purity examinations" on his young female PAs.

So, not to be a Debbie Downer, but perhaps that sense of scale is not immediately discernible from the file that has been sent to the CPS, which relates to a male suspect in his 80s and two indecent assaults on two women in London. The investigation remains ongoing, the Met confirms.

Of course, other under-prosecuted criminal networks are available. During the full-spectrum coverage of the Jeffrey Epstein case, many asked how on earth so many blind eyes could be turned by so many people to so much flagrant abuse by someone who was known to have served prison time for soliciting prostitution from a minor. Yet anyone who couldn't quite believe how it could happen should have been reassured that other vast collective silences were very much ongoing. Peter Mandelson's now notorious message of commiseration to his friend Jeffrey shortly before his 2008 incarceration – "it just could not happen in Britain" – always seems to me ironically resonant. Perhaps his lordship was right, though not in the way he meant.

"There must have been a whole army who facilitated abuse, or looked away, or trashed those who spoke out about it

As the Epstein furore raged on earlier this year, several Al Fayed survivors wrote to me asking why this one case was dominating everything while another, still unresolved one – and so much closer to home – seemed to lack the turbocharge of outrage that pushes something from the places our society would rather forget into the ones where we have our (always belated) reckonings. The answer to that question is normally that significant numbers of people and institutions have a vested interest in *not* getting to the bottom of it.

It would feel unwise to conclude anything other than that in this case. There has been no equivalent political pressure to let daylight in on Al Fayed's activities. No one has got wall-to-wall coverage for asking how he was able to operate an alleged criminal fiefdom in the centre of Knightsbridge, when allegations were repeatedly made and the rumours were more than deafening. It was, it seems, just the way things were.

And as indicated, for things to be that way for so long, there needed to be whole armies of enablers who facilitated abuse, or looked away, or closed down or trashed those who said anything about it, including the alleged victims. Only one of Epstein's helpers, Ghislaine Maxwell, has ever been brought to justice. Typically, no one bar the kingpin in what I think of as the sex-case industrial complex even faces so much as a charge – they simply melt back into society.

Yesterday the Al Fayed survivors' group Justice for Fayed and Harrods Survivors issued a statement pointing out that: "Survivors have spent decades either not being believed or being told that Fayed and those around him were too powerful and that nothing could be done – but today is an important reminder that the passage of time does not, by itself, put accountability beyond reach." Yet the passage of time doesn't exactly help, does it? Al Fayed himself died unscathed, and once things tip conveniently into the "historical" file, they are so much harder to prove.

What Al Fayed's survivors want is the trafficking investigation they have been requesting for almost two years. As they point out, this was not one bad man, nor some form of corporate abuse. It was, they allege, a trafficking network involving multiple perpetrators and enablers and backed by the global movement of illicit funds. At least five survivors have already been confirmed by the Home Office as victims of modern slavery. Yet the Met has been accused of having failed in its legal duty to offer the victims a referral to the national referral mechanism (it's understood the police didn't believe they were obligated to), which identifies modern slavery victims. The campaign group No One Above wants confirmation that human trafficking and modern slavery are the primary framework of the Al Fayed investigation, and to know that financial investigators are being utilised to determine how the network was funded and concealed.

It remains to be seen if any belated percentage of justice will be served. Even if it is, we can expect all manner of blind-eye institutions to immediately resort to their happy place and trot out some trite platitude like "never again". In fact, it would be more accurate to conclude the opposite. Always again. Always again, until society has the courage to realise that it so often takes a village to do bad things, as well as good ones.

* *Marina Hyde's latest book, What a Time to be Alive!, is out in September, and available to order now at the Guardian bookshop*

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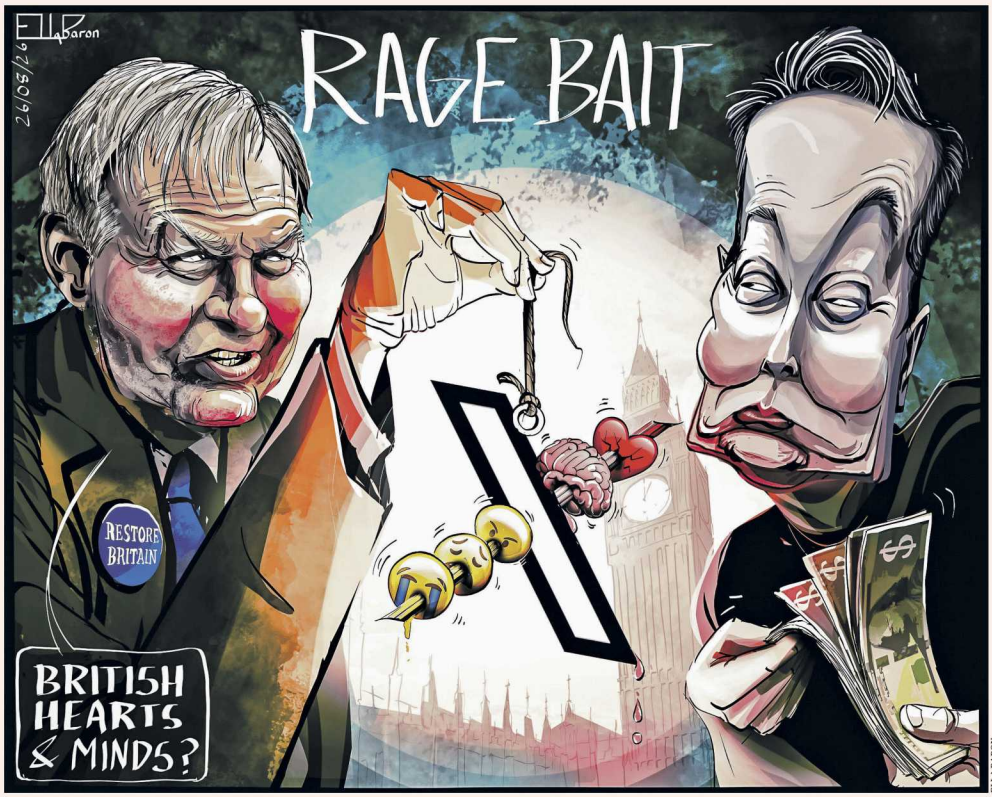


Here's how I'd silence the 'loudcasters'

Dan Hancox

"Interesting cities can't be quiet", runs one of grime DJ and music industry thinker Elijah's epigrams – and in its essential spirit, he is right. Silent, tidy, prim cities should be treated with suspicion. Any such atmosphere denotes that something has gone wrong at a macro level: either you've wound up in an authoritarian regime or, worse, Switzerland.

But not all urban sounds are created equal, and some are more unwelcome than others. Take the tide of (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube) reels crashing on the shores of our collective attention on public transport, thanks to the astonishing number of grown adults who think it's OK to surf the slopwave without headphones. These rotters are accompanied by people taking their phone or video calls out loud on speakerphone.

The spread of 5G across the country is making such unsolicited noise more possible and more common: "loudcasting", the BBC called it in a recent in-depth look at the phenomenon. A public backlash is suddenly mounting. Never one to miss an opportunity for free press coverage, last week Wetherspoons boss Tim Martin banned it from his pubs.

It's funny how social pressure points like this fade in and out of public view as the technology that touches our lives evolves: 19 years ago, the same practice was christened "sodcasting" by Pascal Wyse in this newspaper – at that point there were no reels, no AI drivel, no streaming video calls. I probably annoyed a lot of Guardian readers that year, writing more than 2,000 words in defence of sodcasting: more precisely, in defence of teenagers playing music on their phones on the bus, the train or otherwise in public. There was something qualitatively different about that iteration, I would argue. It was a necessary claiming of public space by people who are often bullied out of it: adults-in-training, still working out how to exist in the outside world as independent beings, still learning to navigate their own social lives and learning to enjoy music *together*, as a group activity.

Interestingly – and admittedly anecdotally; this stuff isn't easy to measure – sodcasting 1.0 seemed to disappear as a phenomenon after a year or two. Let's hope that happens again, because what we are all hearing on buses and trains thanks to sodcasting 2.0 is more antisocial and individualistic: for one thing, 2010's groups of teen sodcasters weren't changing songs every 10 seconds. For another – warning, more anecdotal analysis incoming – these days it always seems to be full-grown adults rather than teenagers taking calls on speakerphone or watching reels with no headphones.

So, as Lenin once asked of matters of similarly grave importance: what is to be done? Last year, the Lib Dems proposed a £1,000 fine for sodcasting – an amusingly illiberal policy to make one of their centrepieces. For what it's worth, I don't think a fine is very useful, realistic or enforceable – though, God bless the ironclad French state, for it managed to find a way to do exactly that, fining a man €200 (£170) for taking a call on loudspeaker on a station platform.

The truth is that we have more sane and effective options for shaping public behaviour in the form of nudge messaging. Transport for London has a strong history of this, via adverts on its trains, tubes and buses. In 2008, its Considerate Travel campaign seemed to help quieten down the mobile phone DJs and its current Act Like a Friend and Travel Kind campaigns aim to address hate crime, misogynistic creeps and encourage others to help passengers who may be unwell.

And if all else fails, well, sod it: let's nudge the culprits into the stocks.

ILLUSTRATION: ANAÏS MIMS/GUARDIAN DESIGN

* **Dan Hancox** *is a writer and editor covering music, politics and cities. His latest book is Multitudes: How Crowds Made the Modern World*

Established 1906

Country diary

Asturias, Spain

On a rocky 13-hectare pocket in the foothills of the Picos de Europa, Luke Massey and Katie Stacey are raising children, dogs, cattle, chicken, ducks, geese and eyebrows. In their eight years here, the farm they call Wild Finca has become a mass of scrub, with scattered large trees and dozens of clearings that Luke calls fields, but which look more like tiny irregular glades, riddled with trails and hemmed all around by the blackthorn, gorse and bramble that has sprung up around the tumbled remains of drystone walls.

If Wild Finca is a forever home to the Massey-Staceys, it is a whole world to nature. Witness the butterflies and wasp spiders, the snakes, lizards, hedgehogs and sparrows, and the thousand-piece cricket orchestra that performs each evening as the glow-worms light up. It offers denning and roosting sites for foxes, pine martens, badgers and 17 species of bat, feeding opportunities for roe deer and wild boar, several species of eagle and vulture, and a pit stop for others such as the nightingale I heard singing in early morning mist.

It is a multifaceted ecological hub, which Luke and Katie say disproves the idea that rewilding can only happen at scale. Wildlife does not see boundaries, and good land is good land.

From a UK perspective, all of Asturias is thrillingly wild, and our time here is a tonic. But it is no ecological utopia. Development for tourism appears underregulated, if the vast techno festival we see setting up nearby and the insane duck-race-cum-traffic-jam of 3,000 plastic rental kayaks bumping daily down the River Salla are anything to go by.

Corruption, commercialism, hunting and small-minded conservatism have challenged Luke and Katie at every turn, but they have allies too: kindly neighbours; the vet who regards their tiny herd as the healthiest cattle in the area; the retired police chief who repeatedly backs them; and the octogenarian who tips them off about an animal whose name is best spoken in a whisper – *el lobo*, the wolf.

The land here is well in range of packs living in the Picos, but the Asturian government has just announced a new cull of 67 out of 400 animals. The sanctuary of Wild Finca will not help them until wider attitudes change.

Amy-Jane Beer

We may edit letters. Submission and publication of letters is subject to our terms and conditions: see theguardian.com/letters-terms

There's no place like a revered writer's home

Your editorial (Writers' houses can be extraordinarily evocative – when they have visitors, 19 August) rightly laments that George Eliot has no publicly open home despite efforts to secure one. The same is true, remarkably, of William Blake, and he is at least as worthy a cause, and arguably even more influential.

Poet, painter, printmaker and author of the words behind Jerusalem, Blake has no open home anywhere. Of his nine addresses, only two survive. In London, the apartment he rented is disappearing behind new development. The other, his cottage in Felpham, West Sussex, where he and his wife, Catherine, lived from 1800 to 1803 and experienced an outburst of creativity, is the only one that could ever open to the public.

I am a trustee of the Blake Cottage Trust, which has spent two years saving it. In 2024 the roof was near collapse and the cottage was on Historic England's at-risk register. Thanks to The National Lottery Heritage Fund and other foundations, artisans have rebuilt the roof and removed a Victorian extension, returning the cottage to its original form. But much of the fabric still needs full conservation before the cottage is truly saved and can be opened to all, and that work costs a great deal of money.

Raising it has not been easy. Even with the backing of the Heritage Fund and other trusts, we will need private philanthropy to fill a significant gap – and, as your article notes of Rydal Mount, heritage sites live or die on relevance and sustainability as much as repair.

That's why our ambition goes beyond bricks and thatch to include opening an arts and education centre near the cottage, conceived not just as somewhere to visit but as a living place of creativity and inspiration in its own right – one with year-round appeal for the local community as much as for returning visitors, and one that properly honours Catherine Blake too, who learned to read under William's guidance and helped hand-print and colour the plates of his illuminated books.

With the 2027 bicentenary of Blake's death approaching, this is a moment when Guardian readers could make a real difference – to find out more, visit blakecottage.org

Richard Clemmow
Trustee, The Blake Cottage Trust

● Your editorial gave a commendable overview of the important work that writers' houses and museums have been doing to reconnect us with our literary heritage. Of course, turning a writer's house into a museum is difficult, and not always viable. But this needn't mean that the house cannot be saved for the nation and enjoyed by the public.

The late poet laureate Ted Hughes was born in a tiny end-terrace house in Mytholmroyd, West Yorkshire. He claimed his first years there "shaped everything". But the house is too small to accommodate tour groups, and parking is limited. So, when the house was saved 20 years ago by The Elmet Trust, a local charity, it was opened to paying guests as a holiday cottage or writer's retreat.

This fully immersive experience goes beyond a visit to any museum. It places you in the poet's shoes. Sleeping in the cosy attic room that Hughes shared with his older brother, or in the bedroom where he was born, inspires because it impresses upon us how humble his start in life was. Leaflets guide you to his favourite walks through the Yorkshire woods and hillsides where he played as a child. His writings often described these places, or the views from his windows, and indeed the rooms in the house itself. There are no display cases, no text panels. This is about lived experience.

A George Eliot museum is indeed a worthy aspiration; a Ted Hughes museum scarcely less so. Yet while a museum is a fitting tribute to any great author, literary tourism at its best is about the readers and the fans as much as the writers. Interactive visitor centres such as Seamus Heaney HomePlace are as vital a part of the future as traditional museums. Engaging with literary landscapes and walks is no less important – for health, for wellbeing, for our environment, for our imaginations. But surely nothing can beat stepping inside the world of a writer by staying in their home.

Dr David Rudrum
Secretary, The Elmet Trust

Learning from lived experiences of poverty

Reading Katriona O'Sullivan's article (Can you be too poor to buy a toothbrush? Yes – that was me, 20 August) reminded me of when I was a community worker at the Park Hill estate in Sheffield in the 1970s.

When I (young and naive) asked the mums why they bought chips for their toddlers for lunch rather than spending the money on fresh fruit (I cringe now in embarrassment), they pointed out that a bag of chips was the price of a couple of apples and one of them filled the kids up. I began to understand, and to also see why they spent money on cigarettes. As O'Sullivan says, "a few bottles [of alcohol] can feel like an escape".

My work there gave me a lifetime of experience in a few months, which I've never forgotten.

Carol Taylor
Matlock, Derbyshire

● What an excellent piece by Katriona O'Sullivan – a very timely riposte to those who pass judgment from the comfort of their broadcasting pods. George Orwell made similar points in The Road to Wigan Pier – desperately poor people still tried (occasionally) to go to the cinema or buy ice-cream rather than spend their subsistence national assistance on tripe.

It was – and is – a matter of human dignity and feeling that you are still living as a person, not as an automaton, as more fortunate people might expect you to be. Perhaps cheap toothbrushes should be free to our poorest citizens as a sensible public-health intervention.

Howard Williamson
Treforest, Rhondda Cynon Taf

Why the threat from machines went ignored

Jill Lepore asks why nobody listened to warnings about the threats posed from the AI revolution (Democracy v the machine, 18 August). As she is a Harvard professor, her piece is understandably US-centric. But in 1972 there was an international gathering of AI researchers and others in Italy to tackle the ethical and social implications of AI.

This "Serbelloni group" of global experts (they met at Villa Serbelloni on Lake Como) was led by my father, Donald Michie, the director of the University of Edinburgh's department of machine intelligence. The group mapped out early concerns regarding potential political tyranny, the erosion of human autonomy and widespread social coercion driven by automation.

Why did nobody listen? In part because the next year the UK cut research funding for machine learning, robotics and AI, following the Lighthill report, which had been established – it has since been documented – for this purpose. Researchers had instead to focus on more immediately industrial-relevant work. My father's attempts to reconvene the Serbelloni group to include experts from the humanities thus proved unsuccessful.

Jonathan Michie
Professor of innovation & knowledge exchange, University of Oxford

Corrections and clarifications

● **We misquoted a study into higher temperatures and uncompensable heat stress (UHS), where the body loses the ability to cool itself, by saying it found that each additional degree of global heating "exposes roughly 1 million more people to at least 180 hours of UHS annually"; the actual figure in the study was 1 billion (Heatwaves pose serious risks for over-60s – study, 18 August, p13). Also, it was published in the journal Lancet Planetary Health, not Lancet Public Health.**

Editorial complaints and corrections can be sent to guardian.readers@theguardian.com or The readers' editor, **Kings Place, 90 York Way, London N1 9GU.** You can also leave a voicemail on **020 3353 4736**

It's time to do away with pass/fail exams

You report (21 August) that "retake pass rates slumped this year". I see now that I was mistaken in believing that the whole idea of replacing O-levels with GCSEs was to end the dispiriting concept of "pass" and "fail" in favour of recognising the sitter's personal level of achievement in a subject.

Vivien Scorer
Southwell, Nottinghamshire

● At my grammar school in 1966, during a morning assembly, it was announced, in thunderous tone, that Susan Shaw must immediately afterwards go and stand outside the headmaster's office. As head girl I dutifully turned up, along with two other Susan Shaws – one of whom looked worried (Letters, 24 August).

Susan Rawson (nee Shaw)
Scarborough, North Yorkshire

● A ponytailed Erling Haaland scored on the opening game in each of the past four seasons. On Sunday the recently shorn Haaland failed to score in the opening match (Sport, 24 August). The Samson effect?

Toby Wood
Peterborough

● In your article (The new Bond? Five alternative roles Meghan might fancy, 22 August), you overlooked the obvious one. Meghan could be the new Doctor in Doctor Who.

Ian Williams
Northolt, London

● Time for a remake of A Yankee in King Arthur's Court?

Jude Carr
London

● Re Meghan and Harry's return, the tabloids are predictably on the case, and now the Guardian. I'm not short of a sense of humour, but I'm sick of all the sniping. For goodness sake, give the woman a break.

Marjorie Firth
Warkworth, Northumberland

Sir Billy Boston

First rugby league player to be knighted, he excelled as an explosive winger for Wigan and Great Britain

Sir Billy Boston, who has died aged 92, was one of the greatest, and most popular, rugby league players of all time. A rambunctious, explosive powerhouse of a winger for Great Britain and Wigan during the 1950s and 60s, he would leave trails of bedraggled tacklers in his wake with his blockbusting runs, while his robust defensive work often left opponents dazed.

With Boston's strength, though, came great pace and handling skills, allied to a swerve and sidestep that few were able to counter. As a result he was a prodigious scorer of tries – 571 in 562 matches across a 17-year career in which he won a World Cup with Great Britain as well as three Challenge Cups and a league championship with Wigan.

Once described as "a showman who doesn't show off", Boston was above all an entertainer, a quietly charismatic crowd-puller whose friendly and modest demeanour made him a fine and impressive ambassador for the game.

Although he was Wigan's favourite son, Boston was born in Tiger Bay, Cardiff, from where his near contemporary, the singer Shirley Bassey, also originated. Like many other inhabitants of that cosmopolitan docklands area, Billy was of mixed heritage. The sixth of 11 children born to John, a seaman from Sierra Leone, and his wife, Nellie, with Irish antecedents, he weighed 6.8kg (15lb) at birth; in his prime he was 95kg (15 stone) of hard muscle on a 1.78m (5ft 10in) frame.

At South Church Street school Billy excelled at sport, and after leaving at 14 worked at a factory making rubber dinghies and parachutes. He played rugby union at a minor club in Tiger Bay, where he became something of a sensation and developed a burning ambition to appear for Cardiff and Wales.

However, although he was picked for various representative teams and was regarded as hot property in the city, Cardiff studiously ignored his prodigious talent. "I was disappointed they never showed an interest in me and I think that was because of my colour," he said. "There was a lot of colour prejudice at the time and I don't think I would ever have played for Wales in those days."

When Neath offered him some games at the age of 17, Boston accepted. But by then rugby league representatives from the north of England were on his trail. Opposed to the idea of leaving Wales and still optimistic of a future in rugby union, he was pleased to be called up on national service the following year, imagining that two years in the Royal Signals as a physical training instructor in Yorkshire would keep him out of the scouts' reach.

However, by 1953 Wigan had also joined the hunt, meeting a reluctant Boston and his parents while he was on leave in Cardiff and proposing a huge £1,500 cash payment in five-pound notes if he would join straight away. Billy was against any deal and so his mother decided to frighten off the club by saying he would sign only for double that fee. To their dismay, a further £1,500 in fivers was immediately slapped on the table, and the offer had to be accepted.

Boston made his debut against Barrow in late 1953 while still serving in the army, scoring a try and almost immediately attracting attention as a future star. After his initial qualms about moving from union to league, he soon became enamoured with the new code, which he found to be more open in all ways. "In rugby union you hardly had the ball as a three-quarter – often enough you could have gone for a smoke behind the posts," he said. "In league I suddenly found the ball was in my hands a lot more."

By the end of his first half-season Boston had scored 14 tries in 10 matches for Wigan and had been called up to play for Great Britain against France in April 1954, giving his side a winning lead seven minutes from the end with his first international try.

Though still an ingenue and not yet 20, he was picked for the Great Britain tour to Australia and New Zealand later that year, becoming, at that point, the youngest ever British tourist, as well as the first black player to go on such a trip. Scoring a record 36 tries in 18 matches and playing in five Tests, he contributed two crucial tries to set up a stunning 38-21 win against Australia in the second Test, and later racked up four against New Zealand in Auckland.

By the end of the tour Boston had become a crowd favourite wherever he went. Although Wigan were not quite the power they had been before he joined, his exciting brand of rugby did much to restore their fortunes over the next decade

Boston, centre, making a break for Wigan during a 1960 match against Wakefield. Right, after receiving his knighthood at an investiture ceremony at Buckingham Palace last year

COLORSPORT/SHUTTERSTOCK; AARON CHOWN/PA/AP

'A showman who doesn't show off' was how Boston was once described. Above all he was an entertainer

as they won the Challenge Cup in 1958, 1959 and 1965 and the league championship in 1960. The league title was sealed in a memorable final against Wakefield Trinity in front of 83,190 spectators at Odsal Stadium in Bradford, where an early try by Boston, followed by a late spectacular run from the halfway line, broke Wakefield's resolve.

For Great Britain, injury reduced Boston's contributions in three World Cups: he was selected but unable to play in 1954, managed only two games in 1957 before a knee problem forced him out, and in 1960 could make just one appearance, although in that lone match, a key 10-3 victory against the holders, Australia, his touch down in the corner for the game's only try did as much as anything to help the Lions win the tournament.

After the 1962 tour of Australia and New Zealand, on which he scored 22 tries in 17 matches, including in successive victories over Australia in Sydney and Brisbane, Boston's last game for his country came in 1963. He finished with 24 tries from 31 Test caps.

Five years later, at the end of the 1967-68 season, Boston called it a day at the age of 33, having scored 478 tries for the club in 487 games. Bored in retirement, he made a surprise comeback midway through the 1969-70 season for lowly Blackpool Borough, but lasted just 11 games and finally bowed out in mid-1971. In 1956 he had married Joan Rudd, a shop assistant, and they went on to run the Griffin hotel pub in Wigan.

Many honours came Boston's way in later life: made MBE in 1996, he was one of the original inductees into the Rugby League Hall of Fame and statues of him were erected at Wembley Stadium and in Wigan. With Gus Risman and Clive Sullivan, he was one of three rugby codebreakers featured in a statue in Cardiff Bay. In 2025 he became the first ever rugby league player to be knighted.

In 1996 a joy rider knocked Boston down outside his home in the Poolstock area of Wigan, necessitating a long period in the local hospital, where he was inundated with bunches of flowers and get-well cards. When the young offender came up for sentencing, the magistrate imposed a curfew order on him for his own protection, warning: "If there's one person you don't knock down in Wigan, it's Mr Boston."

True to his formidable reputation as an unstoppable force on the rugby field, it was reported that the stolen car was a write-off.

Joan died earlier this year and two daughters, Lisa and Angela, also predeceased him. He is survived by his three other children, Christine, Karen and Stephen.

Peter Mason

William John Boston, rugby league player, born 6 August 1934; died 24 August 2026

James Burrows

Leading light of US TV comedy who co-created and directed Cheers

James Burrows, who has died aged 85, was one of the most influential figures in US TV comedy for more than four decades. He was the co-creator and primary director of Cheers, one of America's most successful shows, which ran for 11 seasons between 1982 and 1993 and won 28 Primetime Emmy awards. Its final episode was second only to that of M*A*S*H as the most watched of all time.

However, unlike producer/writers such as Nat Hiken, Norman Lear or Larry Gelbart, who had stamped their marks on previous generations, Burrows' influence came entirely as a director. As such he was intimately involved in the creation of many series, and enjoyed long runs on sitcoms such as the Cheers spin-off Frasier, Friends, and Will and Grace.

He was the first-choice director of pilot episodes, used to sell programmes to the networks; he did almost 100 of them, including two versions, if the first produced only a lukewarm response.

Burrows was one of the first sitcom directors to use four cameras and was renowned for his careful lighting. The extra camera allowed him to block out scenes and get better interaction on one-liner zingers. It was reminiscent of vaudeville or the best Broadway comedy - the cameras and editing leading the audience the way they would follow the performers on the stage. What was the Boston bar in Cheers but a single set on which the comedy played out?

It took one season to make Cheers an overnight success, but much of it was down to Burrows's direction. "I'm not a film director," he explained. "The camera, I leave that to Spielberg and Scorsese. I'm a theatre rat. I stage a play every week, a 20- to 25-minute play, and then my camera comes in and covers it. I understand characters, I understand what's funny, I understand the essence of keeping it moving and keeping the energy going. It's all theatrical. If it doesn't happen on that stage, it's never gonna happen on film."

And he had a sense for how actors would play their scenes. When the final cast of Friends had been chosen, Burrows was so confident in them that he took them away for a weekend, warning them that their lives would never be the same again.

Much American television, not just sitcoms, is structured like a family, and, Burrows said: "I guess I have a knack for creating families." He may have come by his knack from his own family.

Born in Los Angeles, he was the son of Ruth (nee Levinson) and Abe Burrows (ne Abram Borowitz). His father, at the time, was a writer and comedian in Hollywood. The family moved back to New York, where Abe became a major figure on Broadway, writing and directing shows such as Guys and Dolls, Can-Can, and How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying.

James attended the city's High School of Music and Art, but, as he put it, "not wanting to compete with his father", he took a degree in government at Oberlin College in Ohio, before earning a master's in theatre writing from Yale School of Drama in 1965.

His first job was as dialogue director on the Burl Ives sitcom OK Crackerby!, which his father had created. By 1967 he was an assistant stage manager on the musical version of Breakfast at Tiffany's, originally titled Holly Golightly, which starred Mary Tyler Moore. After directing and stage managing in New York, in 1974 he wrote to Moore and her then husband Grant Tinker, who had created The Mary Tyler Moore Show. Tinker started him directing episodes of Mary Tyler Moore and of The Bob Newhart Show, mentored by Jay Sandrich, whose own father had directed some of Fred Astaire's best films.

Burrows also directed MTM spinoffs such as Rhoda and Phyllis, as well as other 1970s hits including Laverne & Shirley, and Taxi, of which he directed 75 episodes, working with the writer/producers (and fellow MTM alumni) Glen and Les Charles. They formed Charles-Burrows-Charles, and after Burrows's only feature film, Partners, a comedy about undercover cops seeking a killer stalking gay men, was released in 1982, Cheers made its debut.

Burrows directed 240 of the 275 episodes of Cheers, as well as a rare 11-minute promotion for government savings bonds using the early Cheers cast. He remained peripatetically busy, doing pilots and episodes of shows that interested him, as well as 32 of Frasier and 15 of Friends. In 1998 he also directed John Mahoney (who played Frasier's father, Martin Crane) on stage in a Chicago revival of The Man Who Came to Dinner.

For the producer Chuck Lorre he directed the pilots of 3rd Rock from the Sun, and Mike and Molly. He was also executive producer while directing Will and Grace, for its eight seasons and its three-season revival, a total of 246 shows. In all, he directed more than 1,000 television programmes, with his last credits being four episodes of the Frasier revival and, in 2025, 10 episodes of Mid-Century Modern.

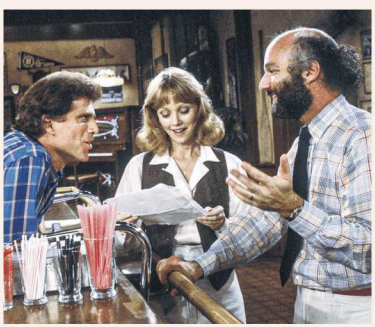
Between 1980 and 2005 Burrows was nominated every year but one for a Primetime Emmy award for directing. He won 11 of them, plus five Directors Guild awards as best director. He received a lifetime achievement award from the Guild in 2014; his memoir, Directed by James Burrows (written with Eddy Friedfeld), was published in 2022.

He is survived by his second wife, Debbie Easton, a hair stylist, whom he married in 1997; his three daughters, Kat, Ellie and Maggie, from his first marriage to Linda Solomon, which ended in divorce in 1993; a stepdaughter, Paris; and seven grandchildren.

Michael Carlson

James Burrows, TV director, born 30 December 1940; died 19 June 2026

> **I guess I have a knack for creating families**



Burrows, right, with Ted Danson, left, and Shelley Long on the set of the sitcom Cheers NBC/UNIVERSAL/GETTY IMAGES

Birthdays

Sally Beamish, composer, 70; **Chris Boardman**, Olympic cyclist, 58; **Michael Cockerell**, broadcaster and documentary maker, 86; **Macaulay Culkin**, actor, 46; **Prof Dame Anna Dominiczak**, chief scientist (health), Scottish government, 72; **Sir James Duddridge**, former Conservative MP and minister, 55; **Prof Marcus du Sautoy**, mathematician and broadcaster, 61; **Monica Galetti**, chef and broadcaster, 51; **The Duke of Gloucester**, architect, 82; **Lord (Michael) Gove**, editor, the Spectator, and former Conservative minister, 59; **Paula Hawkins**, author, 54; **Charlotte Hogg**, former chief executive, Visa Europe, 56; **Lisa Keightley**, cricketer, 55; **Shirley Manson**, singer, 60; **Branford Marsalis**, saxophonist and composer, 66; **Melissa McCarthy**, actor, 56; **Prof Dame Judith Rees**, former president, Royal Geographical Society, 82; **Valerie Simpson**, singer and songwriter, 80; **Alison Steadman**, actor, 80; **Moe Tucker**, drummer, 82; **Lord (David) Watts**, former Labour MP, 75.

Letter

Bill Oddie

In the late 1960s a Sunday morning football team known as the West 11 Wanderers turned out for games in Kensington Gardens, in central London. Bill Oddie (obituary, 28 July) hurtled around the park like an unguided dodgem car: being short and stocky, he undermined many a more sophisticated player.

Other regulars, all taking the game seriously, included John Cleese, Eric Idle and Marty Feldman. A quite regular aftermath of these matches was a retreat to Eric's flat, in a square close to Earl's Court tube station, where a guitar was produced and Eric entertained the small gathering of sweaty sportsmen.

Tim Sharman

Announcements

Deaths

ELLISON, Angela Ruth, died peacefully on 19 July 2026 at the age of 90. Beloved friend and cousin. Family and friends are invited to attend the funeral to be held at Golders Green Crematorium, London NW11 7NL on Friday 28 August at 11am. No flowers, any donations can be made to Amnesty International or the Alzheimer's Society.

In Memoriam

MURPHY, Gerard. In remembrance of Gerard Murphy, actor, director, musician, brother, uncle and friend.13 years ago on 26 August he left us, but is remembered each day, each year. Gerard's work, his brilliance, his true friendship and loyalty will never be forgotten. From Deirdre, Brian, Lawrence, Thomas and Alannah.

For Announcements, Acknowledgments, Adoptions, Anniversaries, Birthdays, Births, Deaths, Engagements, Memorial Services and In Memoriam, email us at announcements@theguardian.com including your name, address and telephone number or phone 0203 353 2114.

Yesterday's solutions

Killer sudoku
Easy

7	4	3	6	2	1	8	5	9
5	1	9	8	7	3	4	6	2
8	2	6	4	5	9	1	7	3
1	7	8	9	4	6	2	3	5
3	9	4	5	8	2	6	1	7
6	5	2	3	1	7	9	4	8
4	6	5	2	3	8	7	9	1
2	3	7	1	9	4	5	8	6
9	8	1	7	6	5	3	2	4

Medium

9	8	4	3	6	2	7	5	1
5	7	2	9	1	4	6	3	8
3	1	6	5	7	8	9	4	2
4	5	8	7	9	3	2	1	6
1	9	7	4	2	6	3	8	5
6	2	3	8	5	1	4	9	7
8	6	9	2	3	5	1	7	4
2	3	5	1	4	7	8	6	9
7	4	1	6	8	9	5	2	3

Codeword

Q	U	I	P	S	■	E	■	B	A	I	T	S		
U	V	■	M	I	X	E	R	■	N	■	I			
A	D	O	■	O	■	I	■	O	F	F	E	R		
Y	■	R	E	G	A	T	T	A	■	L	■			
S	O	Y	A	■	N	■	A	D	J	U	S	T		
■	■	■	■	C	H	O	R	U	S	■	E	■	H	
O	R	P	H	A	N	■	T	H	I	N	L	Y		
B	■	O	■	B	■	■	E	■	Z	■	M			
O	U	T	W	I	T	■	B	E	H	A	V	E		
E	■	E	■	T	R	E	A	T	Y	■	■	■		
S	U	N	D	A	E	■	S	■	M	O	C	K		
■	■	T	■	T	E	N	S	I	N	G	■	I		
A	L	I	B	I	■	A	■	T	■	R	O	W		
R	■	A	■	O	L	I	V	E	■	E	■	I		
M	E	L	O	N	■	L	■	M	U	S	E	S		

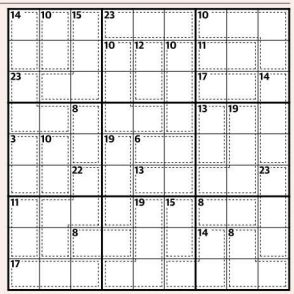
Cryptic crossword
Solution No. 30,094

P	E	A	C	E	F	U	L	■	G	O	T	H	I	C
■	A	■	O	■	L	■	I	A	■	O	■	N	■	■
G	R	O	U	S	E	■	C	O	M	P	O	S	E	D
■	■	■	R	U	■	H	E	■	T	S	■	■	■	■
V	I	C	T	O	R	I	E	S	■	C	H	E	C	K
■	N	■	■	D	■	N	■	W	■	A	■	A	■	■
■	T	I	C	K	E	T	■	T	O	E	C	A	P	■
■	E	■	A	■	L	■	■	R	■	H	■	A	■	■
■	R	E	L	A	I	D	■	A	D	V	E	R	B	■
■	■	■	P	■	E	■	S	■	E	■	L	■	■	■
B	R	A	N	D	■	U	N	D	E	R	L	I	E	S
■	E	■	D	■	M	■	■	I	■	S	■	U	■	■
S	T	E	A	M	I	N	G	■	S	O	N	A	T	A
■	E	■	R	■	S	■	M	■	L	■	C	■	O	■
C	R	E	S	T	S	■	A	N	Y	W	H	E	R	E

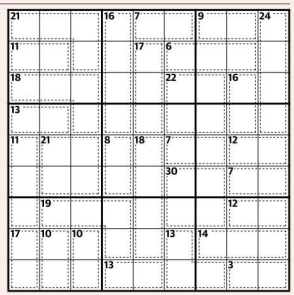
Killer sudoku

Easy

The normal rules of sudoku apply: fill each row, column and 3x3 box with all the numbers from 1 to 9. In addition, the digits in each inner shape (marked by dots) must add up to the number in the top corner of that box. No digit can be repeated within an inner shape.

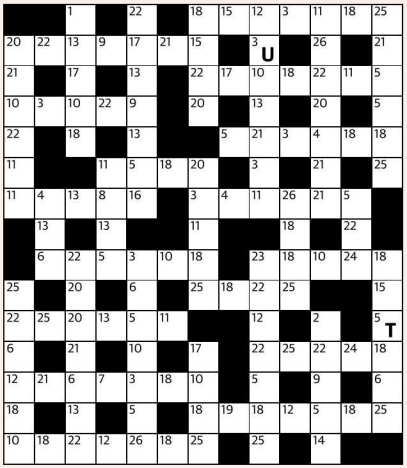


Medium

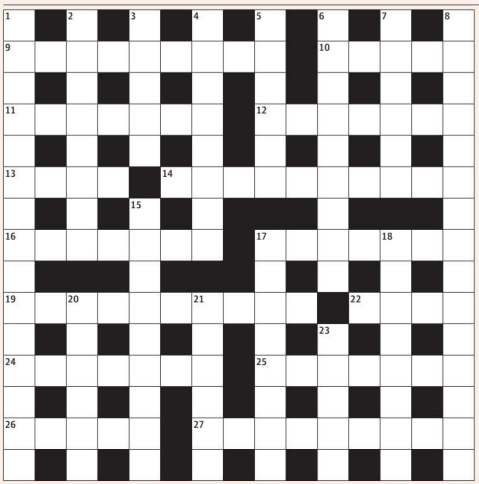


Codeword

Each letter of the alphabet makes at least one appearance in the grid, and is represented by the same number wherever it appears. The letters decoded should help you to identify other letters and words in the grid.



Guardian cryptic crossword No 30,095 set by Paul



Across

9 Big Apple's best ever on bread - and butter (5,4)
10 Possible sickener, incomplete story of environmentalism? (1,4)
11 Father, forward in motion ... (4,3)
12 ... priest entering job (7)
13 Deputy Viking perhaps flayed (4)
14 European city recovering from disappointment, investing not as much (10)
16 A burden for a Titan in debt - Lord have mercy! (1,3,3)
17 Describing a vessel - whimsically or not? (7)
19 Kid's knocked over shed one rebuilt - a wind-up for the horticulturalist? (6,4)
22 Building unit razed to the ground? (4)
24 After embroidering, sender wraps uniform for purchaser (3,4)
25 Pink paper is tucked inside permit, red (7)
26 I don't want you, old bean, in fruit ... (5)
27 ... and similarly in veg? (9)

Down

1 Quite friendly person playing with mates, man paying a visit (2,8,5)
2 How one might make bid, terribly (2,6)
3 Revolution trammelled by democracy, clearly (5)
4 Old drama served up with opera in state capital (8)
5 Small strips in small bone (6)
6 Descent as intolerance of spirit reported? (9)
7 Country in defeat like that, 5-0 (6)
8 LIST, say, how Trump sees Canada? (5-5,5)
15 Book in cypher so encrypted for etailer (9)
17 Fraction outside of second, swimmer pushing hard? (8)
18 Something possibly sugared in water turned up, sweet (8)
20 Sound clothes I had on (6)
21 Run over manuscript for secluded groups (6)
23 Routinely concerned with all one's toes? (5)

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